How to Improve Business Using AI: A Practical Guide to Real Results

Artificial intelligence has moved from futuristic promise to present-day business necessity. But the path from AI experimentation to measurable results remains elusive for many organizations. Here's what the evidence shows about using AI to actually improve your business—and how to do it right.

The Opportunity: Why AI Matters Now

The numbers paint a compelling picture. The global AI market is projected to surge from $233 billion in 2024 to nearly $1.8 trillion by 2032 . But more importantly for individual businesses, 91% of small and medium enterprises using AI report that it directly boosts revenue . AI can reduce operational costs by up to 30% and save businesses more than 20 hours of valuable time each month .

Yet here's the catch: while 88% of organizations now use AI in at least one business function, only about 1% consider themselves fully mature . Most companies are still struggling to move beyond isolated pilots to scalable, value-generating deployments.

The difference between the leaders and the rest is stark. PwC research found that the most "AI fit" companies deliver AI-driven returns **7.2 times higher** than others—and only 20% of companies capture 74% of all AI-driven returns . The question is: how do you join that top tier?

Start Where the Friction Is

For small businesses especially, the most powerful AI application isn't transformation—it's relief . Start with the tasks that consume the most time and yield the least strategic value:

- **Drafting routine communications** – AI writing assistants can draft emails, proposals, and marketing copy
- **Answering common customer inquiries** – AI chatbots handle routine questions 24/7
- **Summarizing documents** – AI can distill lengthy reports into key takeaways
- **Data entry and processing** – AI automates tedious manual data work

One powerful example: Elanco's procure-to-pay team historically processed over 30,000 queries annually, with each taking more than 10 minutes. After deploying an agentic AI system, query resolution dropped to under 10 seconds—a 99% reduction .

The priority at this stage is selecting tools that integrate with what you already use, not overhauling systems that work . A small business doesn't need a custom AI model—it needs a well-configured, accessible tool that gives people back time each week.

Redesign Work, Don't Just Add Tools

This is perhaps the most important insight: **AI value comes from redesigning work, not just deploying technology** . Organizations that treat AI as a drop-in replacement for existing tools miss the bigger opportunity.

The real value comes when AI acts as a genuine teammate—not just a faster tool. Leading companies are giving AI agents names, Slack handles, shared task boards, and the ability to execute tasks autonomously . One fintech COO runs a multi-agent system where anyone can submit one-sentence product ideas via Slack. Ten specialized agents then work simultaneously—covering product definition, feasibility, revenue recognition, and legal compliance—delivering comprehensive requirements within hours .

Another example: a marketplace company went from managing 50 deals per advisor to running 3,000 simultaneously—not by hiring 60 times the staff, but by building agent analysts that handle volume work while humans focus on high-stakes, trust-heavy conversations .

At Target, AI has compressed a month-long supplier vetting process to just three hours using a multi-agent system. What used to take weeks now happens faster than most managers could review a single application .

Aim AI at Growth, Not Just Efficiency

Plenty of companies use AI to become more efficient at the work they already do. AI leaders go further: they treat AI like a reinvention engine .

Leading companies are **2.6 times as likely** as others to report that AI has improved their ability to reinvent their business model . They use AI to spot emerging value pools and create new offerings—not just cut costs.

Consider what this looks like in practice:

- **AI-powered procurement intelligence** at Sanofi reduced cycle time for generating insights by over 85%, unlocking intelligence from unstructured data that was previously unavailable for analytics

- **AI in drug launch processes** at Novo Nordisk helps draft regulatory documents, analyze safety data, and support commercial analytics, potentially saving millions
- **AI-powered store design** at Target enables a team in Bengaluru to design half of all new stores and 80% of remodels without ever walking through them

The pattern is clear: the biggest returns come when AI changes what you sell and how you create value, not just how fast you execute tasks .

Build the Foundations That Make AI Work

"Building what makes you distinctive" is the guiding principle . If something creates a defensible advantage based on your company's data, expertise, or IP—build it. The agtech company we studied builds its own crop-breeding models and IP-landscape scanners in-house. For everything else, they use off-the-shelf tools .

But there's a critical nuance: building custom agents and tools may be inexpensive initially. Maintaining them is not. Many teams now spin up custom agents in hours, but the maintenance bill eventually arrives .

The Knowledge Layer

Many teams obsess over which AI model to run. The ones pulling ahead focus on what their agents can find—and they invest in the knowledge layer that makes the difference .

"The ceiling on your AI is set by your knowledge hygiene, not your model choice," notes the operations director at an energy tech platform. "It isn't an AI problem—it's a knowledge management problem. AI just makes it visible" .

The fix: record every meeting, transcribe automatically, and route outputs to a shared knowledge layer that's accessible to AI. When data is fragmented, agents break. When it's unified, new hires get up to speed in days, not months .

Security: The Non-Negotiable Foundation

AI-related security and privacy incidents rose 56.4% in a single year, and 69% of business leaders now cite AI data privacy as a top concern . The fundamentals apply to every organization:

- Know precisely what data your AI tools can access and enforce firm limits
- Sensitive data should never flow into third-party AI without thorough vendor review
- Establish access controls so employees interact only with relevant tools
- Ensure all AI activity travels through secure, encrypted connections

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The Size-Based Approach to AI Adoption

Small businesses should start where friction is highest—the time-consuming, low-value tasks that drain capacity. Research shows 96% of small business owners plan to adopt emerging technologies, and those that act thoughtfully see the clearest returns .

Mid-size businesses can push further, moving from relief to reinvention . With more resources for data hygiene and custom applications, the opportunity shifts to developing proprietary capabilities.

Large enterprises can pursue full transformation—multi-agent systems, business model reinvention, and industry convergence plays. Leading companies invest about 2.5 times as much of their revenue in AI as others, with software, banking, and media companies investing about 5% of annual revenue .

Measuring What Matters

Stop measuring AI by hours saved. Measure by what the business is now willing to attempt . The question isn't "How much time did we save?" It's "What can we now do that we couldn't before?"

Track systematically. Leading companies are 80% more likely to systematically track the business impact of AI initiatives . Stand up a monthly "scale or stop" review. Only projects with measured movement on a defined business metric get more funding.

The Path Forward

AI will define the next era of business competitiveness. The organizations that approach it with clarity about their needs, their data hygiene, and their security obligations will capture what it offers—and preserve what they've worked to build .

The fundamentals are clear:
1. **Start where friction is highest** – address the time-sucking tasks first
2. **Redesign work around AI** – don't just bolt it onto existing processes
3. **Aim for growth, not just efficiency** – use AI to reinvent what you offer
4. **Build targeted foundations** – invest in data hygiene and security
5. **Measure by business impact** – track what you can now achieve

The companies that approach AI as a teammate—not a tool—and that redesign their work around its capabilities, will be the ones pulling ahead. The rest will wonder why their AI investments never quite paid off.